

John R. Gossage

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The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976

The exhibition is supported by grants from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Washington, D. C.; the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, Washington, D. C.; and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D. C., a Federal agency.

The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976

John R. Gossage

The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D. C.

September 24-November 21, 1976

The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976 is an unprecedented Bicentennial project originated by The Corcoran Gallery of Art. Eight eminent American photographers have been invited to spend extended periods—at least a month—in Washington, D. C. during 1975-76 to photograph the city, its environs and people, as each was guided by his own vision. Thus we hoped to achieve a diversified documentation of a place and time. A selection of four prints by each artist is to be earmarked for exhibition at the Corcoran in the Tricentennial year 2076.

The participating artists, each shown separately, two at a time in four stages throughout the year 1976, are LEWIS BALTZ, San Francisco; JOE CAMERON, Washington, D. C.; ROBERT CUMMING, Los Angeles; ROY DECARAVA, New York City; LEE FRIEDLANDER, New York City; JOHN GOSSAGE, Washington, D. C.; JAN GROOVER, New York City; and ANTHONY HERNANDEZ, Los Angeles.

The artists were selected by Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin. As organizers of this series of exhibitions they have been responsible for the complete task of scheduling and working with the artists at every stage of the project's long development, and for producing the eight catalogues. I wish to express my special appreciation to them and to each of the eight artists for their unstinting cooperation.

The exhibition is supported by grants from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Washington, D. C.; the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, Washington, D. C.; and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D. C., a Federal agency.

Roy Slade, *Director*

John Gossage's conspicuous intellectual sentence is extremely uncommon in an artist of his visual sensitivity. He is an ardent student of photography. He is as irrepressibly curious and competitive as any artist I have encountered. Far from living in an isolated visual world, single-mindedly obsessed with his own photographs, Gossage not only has an extensive and much used library of publications on photography but engages in continual dialogue with his peers, particularly with William Eggleston, Lewis Baltz, Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams, William Christenberry, and the sculptor Anne Truitt, and more recently with Jan Groover, Alex Castro (a non-photographer), and Robert Cumming.

Among photographers, Gossage admires, above all, Eugene Atget; and second to Atget, Walker Evans. He says of Atget that his lesson is simple: "For him, style is dictated by subject matter." It is this to which Gossage professedly aspires in his own work. His other favorite photographers are Timothy O'Sullivan, Clarence Watkins, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus.

Gossage is ultra-conscious of his milieu in both the cultural and physical senses. But his erudition and awareness notwithstanding, his own work often seems to me quite different in character from his stated intentions for it. This is of course a typical state of affairs; artists are often (and of necessity) myopic with respect to their current activity.

Having said that, I want to note that many of Gossage's observations are wonderfully illuminating to the actual work. For instance, he says he has been interested in finding out how much information, detail, density, you can "jam in," and "still have a coherent image." Certain of his most memorable photographs—of the present group *Rear, 901 South 18th Street, Arlington, Virginia* is a perfect example—do test this very question.

As Gossage evolves, the work, to my eye, becomes increasingly more stylistically individuated. Friedlander, for instance, is still an evident force—but less obtrusively so than before. Gossage may have educated himself in the history of his medium to the point at which his bibliographic and sensuous command of the subject are truly formidable; nevertheless he insists that "I believe what I see, not what I read." Certainly the *attention* to what is seen in his photographs bears this out. He is an artist and not, first, a self-conscious stylist or historian.

What is present in the photographs, and missing from Gossage's self-professed attitude about making them, is an intensely stylized and esthetic compositional character. Gossage gets very close to his subject (but without immersing himself in it) and, with the best photographs, lures the viewer into the picture by means of either sheer eccentricity or irresistible esthetic gorgeousness. Often a single, perhaps very small, detail will capture one's attention. *Ant, Corner Lee Highway and North Adams Street, Arlington, Virginia*, for instance, would be entirely unacceptable as a photographic image but for the presence of the ant in its center. Quite how or why this works to transform the work into an eminently successful photograph is worth thought.

Gossage has a sure and daring instinct for the correct size of the print which I find nearly unparalleled among straight photographers. He often prints large, and he has been criticized for this. There is a prejudice among a contingent of purist photographers and photography scholars against larger-than-11" x 14" prints—the suspicion is I think that a violation occurs when one "inflates" a photograph into an image whose size begins to recollect other kinds of graphic images. But Gossage's inclination to bring up the image, both by expanding the size of the print and in the way he prints, so that the all-over density and com-

plexity of detail is both soft and legible, is completely defensible.

Innumerable observations clamor for attention in Gossage's work done for "The Nation's Capital in Photographs"; here there is limited space to expand. Often Gossage seems to push an element so forcibly into the center of the picture that it becomes an intrusion, creating a feeling that the image cannot breathe. Especially in the work just preceding that done for this exhibition, but continuing, too, in this work, the photographer's usual dispersal of focus across the picture field is ignored, most visibly by the device of placing a close-up object (hanging vines, an overturned flower pot, a telephone pole) right in the middle of the composition. The intention of this device is to force the *entire* foreground into the central plane—to virtually ignore two- or three-layered perspectival reference points—crowding things together so that it no longer seems to matter what relative distance is established by various elements. A relationship of pictorial elements is established in some kind of tense limbo, between readable "real-world" perspectival space, and an abstractly satisfying world, perhaps rather like that of moments in Irving Penn, or, differently, Tina Modotti.

We see in the present group of photographs two essential types of work—the rather impenetrably brutal ones such as *Two Broken Bottles*, *Lee Highway at North Irving Street, Arlington, Virginia* which tend to have sparse compositions, and the densely-packed and more seductive ones, such as *3601 Warren Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.* Of the first type, *Marlboro Pike and Boone's Lane, Upper Marlboro, Maryland* is perhaps the most compelling in its paradoxical co-existing qualities of emotional aridity and visual sterility, with a character of highly satisfying abstract beauty created by the juxtaposition of lines, shapes, and rhythmic points. At the other extreme is one of

Gossage's *tours de force*—*811 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C.*, an image conveying distinct humor along with visual richness and perfect topical aptness.

Gossage has stated that one of his goals is "to be able to work anywhere in a way that satisfies me." He recognizes that in photography there are "events that are so important in themselves that the form doesn't matter," but strives himself for a much more difficult synthesis: to describe it he uses the phrase "selective chaos," and elaborates: "I want to recreate the event happening in the past without showing the event." Gossage has learned that any subject can be made seductive. Although he is reluctant to admit that his photographs might be more abstractly, or compositionally, delectable than they are *plain*, or documentary, he'll justify their estheticism by saying, "The ingratiatingness is the come-on to get you in." One implication of this admission is that once you're in you might be hit over the head—and indeed you might. Photographs like *1631 North Barton Street, Arlington, Virginia* and *Burlington Avenue and Selim Road, Silver Spring, Maryland* lure you into an investigative relation to the objects; and the revelations occurring once you're engrossed are not always lovely. But the visual interest doesn't abate; it accelerates. Maybe an essential strength of the photographs is indeed their second-take durability.

Jane Livingston









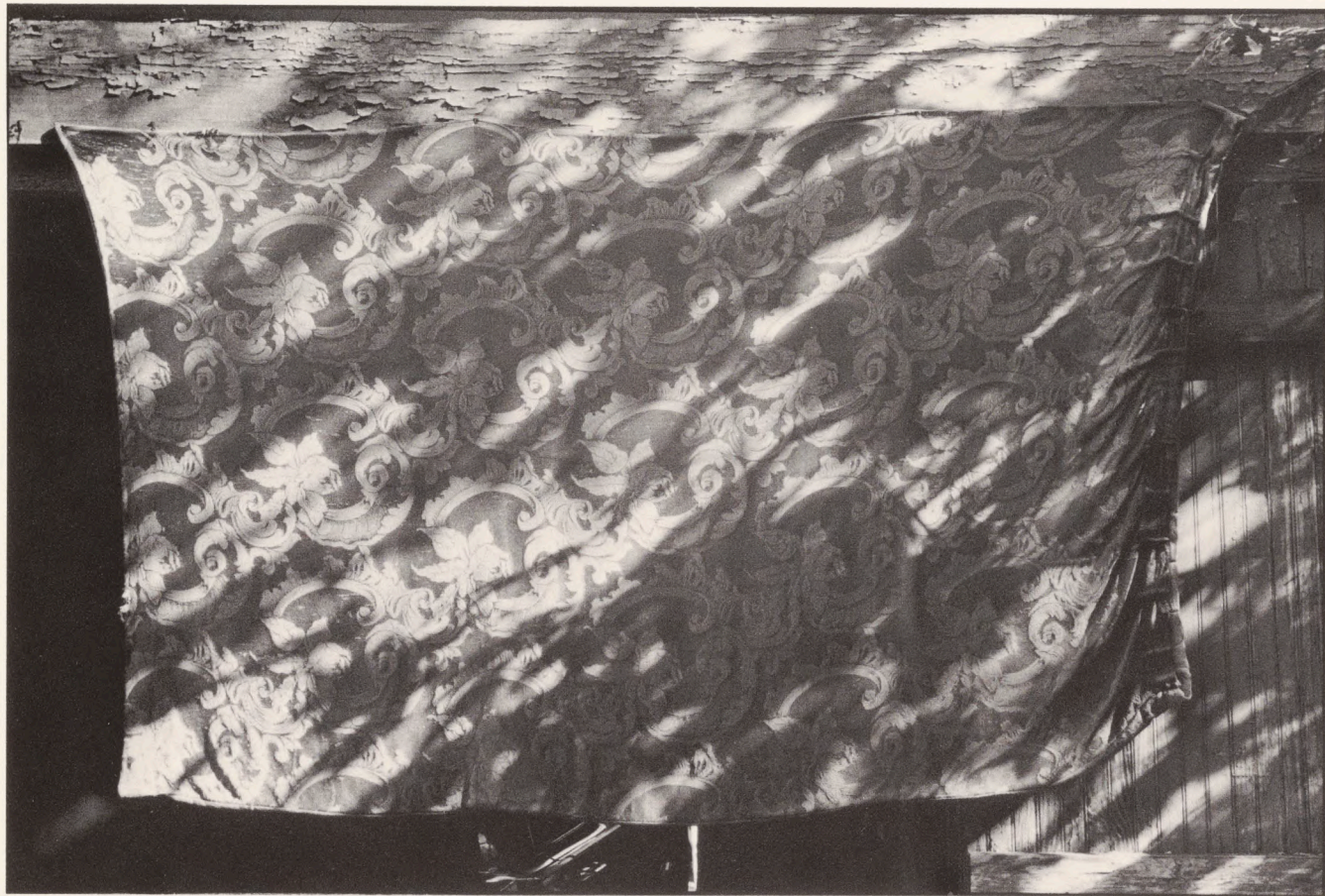






















Catalogue of the Exhibition

All images are 12¾" x 19" printed on 16" x 20" paper, with the exception of Nos. 6 and 22 which are the same size but in vertical format.

Photographs No. 1 through 15 are reproduced consecutively in the catalogue.

1. *Two Broken Bottles, Lee Highway at North Irving Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking West*
2. *1631 North Barton Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking East*
3. *3601 Warren Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking North*
4. *Side, 4519 36th Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking Northeast*
5. *Small Body of Water, North Nelson Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking North*
6. *811 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D. C. At Market Space, Looking West*
7. *Cat, 4505 Ellicott Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking Northwest*
8. *Ant, Corner Lee Highway and North Adams Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking Southwest*
9. *Marlboro Pike and Boone's Lane, Upper Marlboro, Maryland, Looking Southwest*
10. *Rear, 2814 34th Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking East*
11. *Rear, 901 South 18th Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking Northwest*
12. *Ants, Grounds of the Liaison Office of the People's Republic of China, Washington, D. C., Looking West*
13. *Corner of Route 50 (East) and Route 7 (West), Seven Corners, Virginia, Looking North*
14. *Burlington Avenue and Selim Road, Silver Spring, Maryland, Looking West*
15. *Spilled Liquid, Old Dominion Drive and Lorcom Lane, Arlington, Virginia, Looking West*
16. *Corner of Leland and Strathmore Streets, Bethesda, Maryland, Looking East*
17. *Side, 12 East Lenox Street, Chevy Chase, Maryland, Looking Northwest*
18. *802 North Barton Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking West*
19. *802 North Barton Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking North*
20. *Animal Tracks, 4400 Block of River Road, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking Southeast*
21. *Rubber Monkey, Rear, 2310 Tunlaw Road, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking Southeast*
22. *"John Bell Sucks (Dicks) Gerty's Rubber Tits," Arlington Boulevard at South Abingdon Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking West*
23. *Corner of North Pollard Street and Vacation Lane, Arlington, Virginia, Looking North*
24. *Roach, Interior of 1932 Biltmore Street, N.W., Washington, D. C.*
25. *North 20th Road and North Upland Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking Southeast*
26. *Corner of Grandview Avenue and Blueridge Street, Wheaton, Maryland, Looking Northwest*
27. *Corner of University Boulevard (West) and Elkin Street, Wheaton, Maryland, Looking Northeast*
28. *Side, 1365 Geranium Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., Looking West*
29. *Spider, Lee Highway and North Wayne Street, Arlington, Virginia, Looking North*
30. *Interior, 3233 Reservoir Road, N.W., Washington, D. C.*

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- Washington Review of the Arts*. Vol. 2, no. 2, Summer 1976, illus. p. 12.

John R. Gossage

Born New York City, 1946.

Studied with Lisette Model, Alex Brodovitch and Bruce Davidson in New York, 1962-1964.

Graduated Walden School, Washington, D. C., 1965.

Received a Washington Gallery of Modern Art Fellowship grant, 1969, 1970.

Received an individual fellowship in photography from the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D. C., 1974.

Co-curated with Renato Danese *14 American Photographers* exhibition for The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1975.

Curated *Anne Truitt: White Paintings* for The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1975.

Curated *Photography, a Historical Survey, Photographs from the Lunn Gallery*, an Independent Curators Inc. traveling exhibition, 1975.

Presently Instructor of Photography, Department of Art, University of Maryland, College Park.

Lives Washington, D. C.

Individual Exhibitions

1963 Camera Infinity Gallery, New York City.

1968 Hinkley Brohel Gallery, Washington, D. C.

1971 Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

1972 "John Gossage Photographs, Anne Truitt-Color Fields," Pyramid Gallery, Washington, D. C.

1974 "Cultivation and Neglect," Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D. C.

1976 Castelli Graphics, New York City.

Max Protetch Gallery, Washington, D. C.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1964 New York Coliseum Photo Expo, New York City.

1965 Lever House, New York City.

1968 "All Kinds of People," Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D. C.

1969 "Joe Cameron-John Gossage," Corcoran Gallery—Dupont Center, Washington, D. C. Catalogue (introduction by Walter Hopps).

1970 "San Francisco Art Institute Invitational," San Francisco, California.

1971 "Workshop," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

"11 Photographers," Maryland Institute, Baltimore, Maryland; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

"Corcoran Photography Workshop, 1st Invitational," Corcoran Gallery—Dupont Center, Washington, D. C.

1972 "Recent Acquisitions," Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena, California.

"Photography Here and Now," University of Maryland Art Gallery, College Park, Maryland. Catalogue.

1973 "Photography at Jefferson Place Gallery," Washington, D. C.

1975 "14 American Photographers," Baltimore Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Catalogue (text by Renato Danese).

Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland.

"Photography 2," Glenn Smith Gallery, Newport Beach, California. Catalogue.

1976 "The American Landscape," Philadelphia Print Club, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

"Color Photography," Broxton Gallery, Los Angeles, California.

Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland.

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